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Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Issues

The lack of gender parity that exists throughout Northern Irish society is a key factor hindering the development of a new shared future. Women in Northern Ireland have not been afforded the opportunity to participate equally in progressing the country from a society in conflict to a peaceful society. This has a negative impact on social and economic development, particularly for those already experiencing disadvantage; such as rural women.

Rural Women's Groups and Rural Community Groups offer a vital link to rural women and their families in reducing social isolation and providing activities. NGOs can be a base for service delivery and, often, bespoke support. This work has been historically under resourced. The final report of the evaluation of the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme states there are stark inequities between Government funding for service delivery between rural (1.3 per cent) and urban (98.7 per cent). Even within the women's sector, rural women still need a stronger voice; rural women experiencing domestic violence are more vulnerable due to their social isolation and distance from service support.

The Northern Ireland conflict has had an impact on the process of social change (Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation — Dr Helen Mc Laughlin) and post Good Friday Agreement policy making has not improved matters for women. There is no evidence of a gender lens on the development of programmes and policies and development of a revised Gender Equality strategy has been put on hold. Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), a membership organisation, has expressed concern that the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland is having further adverse impact on women.

In its rural women's manifesto — 'Rural Women Speak', NIRWN identifies that this negative impact is amplified for women in rural areas. While women in general in Northern Ireland remain under represented in public and political life for rural women participation is further hindered by geography and distance from decision making spaces. The accessibility of education, training, work and childcare provision and the cost and availability of public transport are factors in determining women's participation. Additionally, the Government Department responsible for agriculture, environment and rural affairs has stated that the cost of living is more expensive in rural areas. In addition, NIRWN research also indicates that those in the rural west are experiencing more deprivation.

Rural women play a vital role in farm families, businesses and as entrepreneurs. Whilst the Rural Development Programme for NI provides a strong platform for women's needs to be articulated, women continue to be underrepresented group Programmes to date. The Rural Development Programme has the potential to be transformative for rural women by engaging them in decision making; supporting entrepreneurship; improving villages and developing rural tourism, but rural women must be recognised as a target group and actively engaged in the Programme.

Additionally, none of the appointed Local Action Groups for delivery of the Rural Development Programme has met the recommended requirement of 50:50 gender balanced Board of Directors. This inevitably has an impact on the gender balance of assessment panels which are distributing the resources at local level with

only one Local Action Group achieving gender balanced assessment panels and some panels having one hundred per cent male representation

There has been no substantial, dedicated mainstream rural development fund in Northern Ireland border areas between Northern Ireland and Ireland and groups and organisations have relied on European funding since the early 1990s. Similarly, the community/voluntary infrastructure and support in rural Northern Ireland has been heavily funded through European Peace and European Social Funds.

This finance will not be available when the UK leaves the EU and there has been no guarantee that this funding will be replaced. Further cuts to rural programmes will be experienced when the European Rural Development Programme stops; there will be no common agricultural policy and no single farm payments; monies that are currently sustaining rural communities and families in Northern Ireland have not been guaranteed. NIRWN reports 98 per cent of its members have said they are 'concerned' about the impact of leaving the EU on them, their families and their communities.

Northern Ireland is a post conflict society still in transition and the potential impact on peace if a 'hard' border is established between the north of the island of Ireland and the rest of the island are very real. Those families who live along the border areas have indicated to NIRWN that not only are they worried about the impact on peace in their communities but their lives are such that they live and work crossing the border several times a day. They cannot envisage how their economic and social lives could be sustained with a reinstated border.

Recommendations

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP) recommends:

The full implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Northern Ireland — a recommendation of the CEDAW Committee following its examination of the UK in 2013. This would ensure:

- Gender balanced decision-making in the Northern Ireland Executive, local councils and publicly appointed boards;
- Visible women at decision-making level to work for sustainable peace;
- Actions in public policy for women, particularly rural women;
- Inclusion in the UK National Action Plan which is at present being updated.

The inclusion of and action on rural women's voice in public policymaking, including to ensure:

- Their historic invisibility is not mirrored in a post-conflict society;
- Effective government programmes and funding, particularly cross-border programmes.

Visible commitment to gendered policy making, mainstreaming and positive action, to include:

- Gender impact assessment;
- Gender budgeting;
- A Gender Equality Strategy to include meaningful actions for rural women;
- An effective childcare strategy.as are entirely unable to consider education or work at all (Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to

Participation; compiled by Dr Helen Mc Laughlin). Northern Ireland needs a Childcare Strategy to address these concerns.

- A new Rural Development Programme for 2014–2020, accessible to rural women administered through Local Action Groups with increased (50/50) representation for women and gender competence.
- Copper fastening and strengthening of the human rights, including civil, economic, social and cultural rights, secured through UK membership of the European Union in the Brexit process, the EU Withdrawal Bill and any subsequent legislation.
- Delivery of the Bill of Rights for NI, proposed in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).